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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the relationship between peer relations and help-seeking behavior. Seventy-four subjects, predominately black boys and girls, were drawn from the third and fifth grades. A roster-rating sociometric scale was used to obtain measures of children's perceived academic competence, desirability as a helper, and friendship status in their reading and math classes. Intensive naturalistic observation of a subset of these children in their classrooms provided data on actual help-seeking behavior. The relationship between peer relations and academic help-seeking was found to vary with the target of the help-seeking overture and with the type of help requested. The helper's perceived academic competence and friendship status were important determinants of help seekers' liking of their helpers, but the impact of these factors differed for boys and girls. In reading classes, significant negative correlations were found between instrumental help-seeking and competence ratings received from both same- and opposite-sex classmates. In math classes, however, frequency of instrumental help-seeking was not related to any of the peer sociometric ratings. (Author/RH)

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Academic Help-seeking and Peer Relations in School

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Abstract

This study investigated the relationship between peer relations and help-seeking behaviors. The subjects were 26 third and 48 fifth grade boys and girls. The roster-rating technique was used to obtain measures of children's perceived academic competence, desirability as a helper, and friendship status in their reading and math classes. Intensive naturalistic observation of a subset of these children in their classrooms provided data on actual help-seeking behavior. The relationship between peer relations and academic help-seeking was found to vary with the target of the help-seeking overture and the type of help requested. The helper's perceived academic competence and friendship status were important determinants of help-seekers' liking of their helpers, but the impact of these factors differed for boys and girls.

Academic Help-seeking and peer relations in school

The importance of peers in children's social, social-cognitive, and cognitive skill development has long been recognized (Hartup, 1983). Upon school entry, the classroom becomes a major arena for the development of peer relations. A salient feature of peer relations in the classroom are helping exchanges between peers (e.g., Hertz-Lazarowitz, 1983; Nelson-Le Gall & Glor-Scheib, in press). One important way in which children in classrooms may be helpful to peers is by sharing academic resources and information. Indeed, children value the academic achievement of their peers and that achievement is associated with positive peer relations (Green, Forehand, Beck, & Vosk, 1980; Hartup, 1970; McMichael, 1980; Roff, Sells, & Golden, 1972; Tuma & Hallinan, 1979). A child who is perceived to be academically competent may be held in high esteem by their classmates, especially if the child responds positively to peers requests for help.

In the classroom, children are as likely to be help-seekers as they are to be helpers. In a large, traditionally structured classroom, children must monitor their own task performance and attempt to deal with discovered problems for themselves because the teacher cannot always perform this function for them. This means that students may sometimes need to seek help from the teacher or other students in order to remain actively engaged in academic tasks.

The purpose of the present study was to examine the relationship between children's solicitation of academic help and peer relations in the classroom. Whereas the relationship between help-giving and peer acceptance has been well-documented, (e.g., Hartup, Glazer, & Charlesworth, 1967), the relationship between help-seeking and peer acceptance is less

clear. Some researchers have found a negative association between help-seeking and peer acceptance (e.g., Coie, Dodge, & Coppotelli, 1982); other researchers, however, report a positive association (e.g., Hartup, 1970; Moore & Updegraff, 1964). A distinction that may be important to understanding the relationship between help-seeking and peer-acceptance is the distinction between excessive, or maladaptive, help-seeking and instrumental help-seeking (Murphy, 1962; Nelson-Le Gall, 1981). Excessive help-seeking refers to children's efforts to have someone else solve problems they have not earnestly attempted to solve by independent means or problems that they are capable of solving for themselves. In this mode of help-seeking the child is only minimally involved or may even relinquish control of the task to the helper. In contrast, instrumental help-seeking refers to those instances in which children's independent efforts are ineffective and the help sought is limited to the amount and type needed to solve problems for themselves. The studies reporting negative relationships depict help-seeking in negative terms, such as unnecessary and excessive (e.g., Coie et al, 1982). If children ask too often for help that is unnecessary, or are seen as trying to put their work off on others, then it is likely that such help-seeking would contribute to low peer acceptance.

The target of the help-seeking behavior may also determine whether help-seeking detracts from or enhances peer acceptance. In studies reporting a negative relationship between peer acceptance and help-seeking, the target of the request has been the teacher or some other adult authority figure (e.g., McCandless, Bilous, & Bennett, 1961). In a review of the literature, Hartup (1970), suggested that help-seeking was a socially mature form of dependency that when directed toward peers rather than to adults may actually be an attribute of popular children. Most of

the studies supporting this notion involved preschool children in nursery school settings. For older children in most classroom settings, however, it may be more appropriate for children to direct help-seeking overtures to the adult teacher rather than to peers.

An additional purpose of the present research was to assess the impact of perceived helper competence and friendship status on the help-seeker's selection of peer helpers. Research (e.g., Nelson-Le Gall & Gumerman, 1984) has suggested that children's help-seeking behavior may be influenced by the potential helper's perceived competence and by the child's social relations with the helper. Students may be more likely to seek help from their friends as opposed to non-friends because they believe friends are more likely to help than are non-friends. Assuming that students want a successful solution to the problem they should also be more likely to seek help from classmates perceived to be highly competent rather than from classmates perceived to be less competent. Because the sex of the helper has been identified in previous research (e.g., DePaulo, 1978; Northman, 1978) as an influence on the help-seeker's choice of helpers, the present study also examined the relationship of help-seeking to both same-sex and opposite-sex peer relations.

Method

Subjects

Seventy-four children in third (n=26) and fifth (n=48)grades were participants. The third graders ranged in age from 8 years, 5 months to 9 years, 8 months; and the fifth graders, from 10 years, 6 months to 12 years, 4 months. All children attended a local parochial school that served a primarily lower-middle class population. All but 9 of the children were black. Written parental permission was obtained for all children participating in the study.

Instruments and Procedures

Sociometric Assessment. A roster-and-rating sociometric scale was used to assess three dimensions of children's peer relations. The measure was group administered in children's reading and math classes. Unlike the children at the third grade level, children at the fifth grade level received reading instruction in two different classrooms. In math, children received instruction in single, self-contained classes at both the third and fifth grade levels. Children were taught to use the 5-point scale (with 1 being "not at all" and 5 being "very much"), and then rated each of their classmates in response to the questions: "How good is this person in reading/math?", (academic competence), "How much do you like to get help from this person with reading/math lessons (helper desirability), and "How much do you like this person as a friend?" (friendship). Children were encouraged to cover their forms while they worked and were assured that their completed forms would not be seen by anyone in the school.

Behavioral observations. A subset of the children in math and reading classes at each level were targeted for intensive observation. Ten children, 5 boys and 5 girls, were included at each grade level in each course for a total of 40 students. Four undergraduate students and two graduate students served as observers and were trained to use the coding procedure and behavioral categories. The observers were trained by using videotapes and observing in other classrooms until a minimum criterion of 90% intercoder agreement was obtained for each behavioral category. Coder reliability, assessed between trained and experienced data collectors, was maintained with a range of 91% to 100% for each of the categories throughout the duration of the classroom observations.

One-hundred minutes of data on each targeted student in the class were collected in 10-minute segments randomly sampled over a six week period. Observations were made only when the regular classroom teacher was present. Observers followed the activity of a single focal child during a given observation segment. When a target child initiated interaction with a teacher or peer for the purpose of soliciting aid, information or materials pertinent to the task at hand, observers coded the target of the bid, the nature of the request (whether excessive or instrumental help was requested), and the responses to the request. Observation of the interaction continued until the interaction sequence was terminated or interrupted. Observers maintained a distance close enough to enable them to view the child's behaviors and to hear any verbalizations without being intrusive. Observers did not intervene in the child's activities or respond to any bids for help.

Results

Peer Assessments

Because of some overlap in the classroom rosters, separate 2 (grade) x 2 (sex of ratee) x 2 (sex of rater) multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) tests (with rater sex as a within group variable) were conducted on the peer ratings collected in reading and math classes. This separation of data from reading and math classes was maintained throughout data analysis. The three measures on which each child was rated were academic competence, helper desirability and friendship. Significant multivariate effects were followed by univariate analyses of variance.

Reading. The multivariate analysis of ratings given to children in reading by their peers indicated that third graders tended to receive more favorable ratings overall (m = 3.36) than did the fifth graders (m = 3.28), $F(3,68) = 3.37$, $p < .05$. A significant multivariate main effect was also found for sex of ratee, $F(3,68) = 5.41$, $p < .005$. Subsequent univariate tests indicated that girls (mean = 3.57) were perceived to be more academically competent than were boys (mean = 3.03), and were also more desirable (mean = 3.36) as helpers than were boys (mean = 2.75).

According to the multivariate analysis, ratings varied significantly with the sex of the rater, $F(3,68) = 40.18$, $p < .0001$. For all three dependent measures, children received higher ratings from same-sex raters than from opposite-sex raters (see Table 1). There was, however, a significant sex of rater x sex of ratee interaction, $F(3,68) = 4.80$, $p < .005$; and a significant grade x sex of rater x sex of ratee interaction, $F(3,68) = 15.08$, $p < .0001$. Examination of the univariate tests (see Table 2) indicated that the disparity between friendship ratings by same-sex and opposite-sex classmates was greater at the third grade level for boys than for girls, and greater at the fifth grade level for girls than for boys.

Insert Tables 1 and 2 about here

Math. A significant main effect was found for sex of ratee, $F(3,45) = 5.53$, $p < .005$. As in reading classes, girls (mean = 3.48) were perceived to be more competent in math than were boys (mean = 2.92) and were more desirable as helpers (mean = 3.43) than were boys (mean = 2.93). The grade x sex interaction was found to be significant at the multivariate level, $F(3,45) = 5.70$, $p < .005$; but was not significant in the univariate analyses of the three dependent measures. Overall, fifth grade boys

received significantly lower ratings from their classmates, than did the other groups.

Again, the sex of the rater had a significant effect on the ratings children received, $F(3,45) = 56.39$, $p < .0001$. On all three dependent measures children were rated more highly by their same-sex peers than by their opposite-sex peers (see Table 1). There were, however, significant interactions for sex of rater x sex of ratee, $F(3,45) = 8.55$, $p < .0001$; and grade x sex of rater x sex of ratee, $F(3,45) = 12.69$, $p < .0001$. Univariate analysis indicated significant three-way interactions for the friendship ratings and the competence ratings. Analysis of the simple effects of this interaction (see Table 2) for the friendship measure revealed the same pattern of findings at the third grade level as those reported for reading classes; no significant differences were found among means at the fifth grade level. The simple effects of the three-way interaction found for competence ratings were also examined. The grade x sex of ratee interaction was significant for opposite-sex ratings ($p < .02$), but not for same-sex ratings ($p > .20$). Third grade boys and girls were rated as equally competent by their opposite-sex classmates in math, whereas fifth grade girls received significantly higher competence ratings from their opposite-sex classmates than did fifth grade boys (see Table 3).

Insert Table 3 about here

Perception of Help-seekers

The intercorrelations of peer ratings (i.e., academic competence, helper desirability, and friendship) with the frequency of children's help-seeking from classmates and teachers are shown in Table 4 for reading and math. In reading, excessive help-seeking from peers was not

significantly related to the ratings from same-sex classmates but was negatively related to all sociometric ratings from opposite-sex classmates. Instrumental help-seeking from peers bore a negative relationship to same-sex and opposite-sex ratings of academic competence. Frequency of seeking instrumental help was not related to helper desirability and friendship ratings received from classmates. Also, help-seeking directed towards the teacher was unrelated to the peer sociometric measures.

In math, excessive help-seeking directed toward peers was negatively related to ratings of academic competence and helper desirability made by same-sex classmates. No significant relationships were found between excessive help-seeking and sociometric ratings from opposite-sex classmates. The frequency of seeking instrumental help from peers was not related to peer ratings received from same-sex or opposite sex classmates. The frequency of seeking help from teachers was also not correlated with peer sociometric ratings.

Insert Table 4 about here

Observed Helper Selections

It was expected that children at the grade levels included in the present study would initiate more contact with their same-sex peers than with their opposite-sex peers. However, given the data reported in the first section of the results of this study that girls were perceived to be more desirable as helpers than were boys, it was of interest to determine whether the incidence of seeking help from same- vs opposite-sex classmates was the same for boys as for girls.

In reading, more help-seeking overtures were directed to same-sex classmates than to opposite sex classmates. Boys contacted same-sex peers (81.4%) slightly more than girls did (68.2%). This difference was not significant. In math, children also chose same-sex classmates as helpers more often than opposite-sex classmates. Boys chose same-sex peers in 88.9% of all help-seeking episodes and girls chose same-sex peers in 83.3% of their overtures. Thus, although both boys and girls may perceive female classmates to be more desirable than male classmates as helpers, children's actual helper selections did not reflect this bias.

The effects of the chosen helper's perceived academic competence and friendship status on boys and girls ratings of their helper's desirability were examined in a 2 (help-seekers' sex) x 2 (helper's competence) x 2 (friendship status) ANOVA for reading and math separately. In order to assess the effect of friendship status on children's selection of helpers, peer helpers given ratings of 2 or lower were classified as nonfriends and those receiving ratings of 3 or higher were classified as friends. In addition, children in the classroom were ranked according to the average competence ratings that they received from same-sex peers. Children who ranked above the median were categorized as high competent, and those below, as low competent.

Reading. The ANOVA conducted on help-seeker's ratings of their helpers' desirability yielded a significant main effect for sex, $F(1,79) = 44.42$, $p < .0001$. Girls liked getting help from their helpers (mean = 5.59) more than did boys (mean = 4.07). Also, helpers who were perceived as being highly competent in reading were liked more as helpers (mean = 5.16) than those helpers perceived to be less competent (mean = 4.17), $F(1,79) = 8.71$, $p < .005$. The friendship status of the helper also yielded a significant main effect. Helpers who were considered to be the

help-seeker's friend were liked more as helpers (mean = 5.32) than those who were not considered to be a friend (mean = 4.18), $F(1,79) = 12.29$, $p < .001$. This finding, however, is qualified by the significant friendship status of helper x sex of help-seeker interaction, $F(1,79) = 4.69$, $p < .05$. Whereas girls rated friends (mean = 5.91) and nonfriends (mean = 5.24) equally desirable as helpers, boys rated friends (mean = 4.87) more desirable than nonfriends (mean = 2.33).

Math. The ANOVA performed on help-seekers ratings of how much they liked to get help from their actual helpers yielded several significant findings. Friends were liked more as helpers than nonfriends, $F(1,118) = 13.18$, $p < .0005$; and highly competent children were more liked than less competent ones, $F(1,118) = 5.03$, $p < .03$. These effects, however, are qualified by a significant helper competence x helper friendship status x help-seeker's sex interaction, $F(1,118) = 8.44$, $p < .005$ (see Table 5). A simple effects analysis indicated that boys and girls showed different patterns in their ratings of friend and nonfriend helpers who were perceived to be highly competent ($p < .01$), but not in their ratings of helpers perceived to be low in competence. Whereas boys and girls both rated competent friends as highly desirable as helpers, boys rated competent nonfriend helpers as less desirable than did girls.

Insert Table 5 about here

Discussion

A major purpose of the present study was to investigate the relationship between children's help-seeking behaviors and their social acceptance by classroom peers. The findings of this study support the hypothesis that the relationship between help-seeking behaviors and peer acceptance varies with both the helper approached and with the type of help requested. Unlike findings from previous studies with preschool populations (see Hartup, 1970) which report negative correlations between peer acceptance and help-seeking from adults, the present study found no significant relationship between peer sociometric ratings and the frequency of seeking help from the teacher. In the present study, seeking academic help from the teacher was an appropriate behavior and one compatible with the social norms of the classrooms, and as such did not interfere with peer relations. It is important to note, however, that children sought help almost three times as often from their peers as from the teacher and that the infrequency of this phenomenon may also have contributed to the failure to find significant relationships.

Significant negative correlations were found between peer sociometric ratings and help-seeking from peers. This finding is compatible with Coie et al's (1982) report that unpopular children are viewed by their classmates as seeking help more than popular children. The present study, however, extends the findings of previous work and provides data to suggest that the relationship between peer relations in the classroom and help-seeking may actually be more complex. The relationship between seeking help from peers and peer acceptance was found to differ in reading and math classes according to the type of help requested and according to whether the ratings were made by same-or opposite-sex classmates. In reading classes, significant negative correlations were found between

instrumental help-seeking and competence ratings received from both same- and opposite-sex classmates. In math classes, however, frequency of instrumental help-seeking was not related to any of the peer sociometric ratings. Interestingly, the most direct measures of peer acceptance, namely ratings of liking as a helper and liking as a friend, were not negatively related to instrumental help-seeking. It may be that children's requests for instrumental help are viewed by classmates as a clear indicator of the limitations of current reading skills. A high frequency of requests for instrumental help (i.e., learning how to) in reading might be particularly detrimental to peer status because students at the third and fifth grade levels are expected to have a fair degree of mastery of basic reading processes; whereas in math, new fundamentals are still being taught at these levels. Unfortunately, the correlational nature of the data limit us to speculation about possible causes of the observed relationships. In contrast, frequency of excessive help-seeking was negatively related to all sociometric ratings from opposite-sex classmates in reading, but to none of the ratings from same-sex peers. Frequency of excessive help-seeking from peers in math was related to ratings of desirability as a helper and academic competence from same-sex classmates, but to none of the ratings from opposite-sex classmates. In sum, excessive help-seeking from peers seems to detract from children's peer relations in more ways than does instrumental help-seeking.

The present study also investigated children's helper selections. In these classrooms as a whole, girls were perceived to be more desirable as helpers than were boys. This finding is consistent with the findings from previous studies (DePaulo, 1978; Northman, 1978) in which interview data were obtained from students about their preferences for helpers. In addition, girls were rated more highly than boys in academic competence by

both same- and opposite-sex classmates. Nevertheless, girls were not the targets of cross-sex help-seeking more often than boys were. In fact, both boys and girls requested help from classmates of their same sex more frequently than from classmates of the opposite sex. The results of the present study underscore the importance of obtaining both verbal self-reports of helper preferences as well as behavioral observations of helper selections.

Consistent with the findings previous interview studies of children's helper preferences (e.g. Barnett, Darcie, Holland, & Kobasigawa, 1982; Nelson-Le Gall & Gumerman, 1984), the present study found helper competence and friendship status to be important determinants of helper selections. Overall, help-seekers preferred help from highly competent classmates and friends rather than help from less competent classmates and nonfriends. However, boys preferred nonfriend helpers less than girls did, even when the nonfriend helper was highly competent. Since children's friends were more often of their own sex, and since girls were perceived to be more competent than boys were, girls had a greater chance than boys of choosing a helper who was perceived as being highly competent from among their friends. Thus, although boys may have believed that girls would be competent helpers, girls would still be less desirable as helpers than a boy's friends who were, more often than not, other boys.

In conclusion, the combination of sociometric interviews with naturalistic observational methods in the present study has proven to be quite useful in providing a more detailed picture of behavioral correlates of peer status in the elementary school classroom. Researchers must now begin to investigate more intensively on specific aspects of children's classroom performance and functioning as both behavioral antecedents and consequences of peer status in the classroom.

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Table 1

MEAN SOCIOMETRIC RATINGS OF CLASSMATES IN READING AND MATH AS A FUNCTION OF RATER'S SEX

Reading

Sociometric measure	Sex of rater	
	Same-sex	opposite-sex
Academic competence	3.50	3.13
Desirability as helper	3.40	2.73
Friendship	3.98	3.10

Math

	Same-sex	opposite-sex
Academic competence	3.35	3.09
Desirability as helper	3.72	2.67
Friendship	4.03	3.14

Table 2

MEAN FRIENDSHIP RATING GIVEN TO BOYS AND GIRLS IN READING AND MATH BY SAME- AND OPPOSITE-SEX CLASSMATES

Reading

Grade	Sex or Ratee	Sex of Rater: Same-sex	Sex of Rater: Opposite-sex
3	Boys	4.44	2.90
	Girls	3.91	3.46
5	Boys	3.72	3.14
	Girls	3.68	3.02

Math

3	Boys	4.44	2.90
	Girls	3.91	3.46
5	Boys	3.99	3.05
	Girls	3.76	3.15

Table 3

MEAN ACADEMIC COMPETENCE RATINGS GIVEN TO BOYS AND GIRLS BY SAME- AND OPPOSITE-SEX CLASSMATES

	Sex of Ratee	Sex of Rater	
Grade		Same-sex	Opposite-sex
3	Boys	3.28	3.11
	Girls	3.65	3.08
5	Boys	2.76	2.32
	Girls	3.57	3.58

Table 4

INTERCORRELATIONS BETWEEN HELP-SEEKING BEHAVIORS AND SOCIOMETRIC RATINGS IN READING AND MATH

READING

Helper Approached	Type of Help-seeking	Same-sex Peer Ratings			Opposite-sex Peer Ratings		
		Helper Desirability	Academic Competence	Friendship	Helper Desirability	Academic Competence	Friendship
Peers							
	Instrumental	-.326	-.462**	.055	-.368	-.566***	-.368
	Excess	-.299	-.342	-.184	-.600***	-.467**	-.467**
Teachers							
	Instrumental	-.196	-.175	-.029	-.272	-.201	-.133
	Excess	-.091	-.018	-.038	-.083	-.094	-.009

MATH

Peers							
	Instrumental	-.028	-.250	-.168	-.203	-.188	-.041
	Excess	-.386*	-.460**	-.074	-.308	-.302	-.009
Teachers							
	Instrumental	.148	.166	-.161	-.054	-.076	-.095
	Excess	-.086	-.136	.312	-.107	.115	.058

*p .05
**p .025
***p .005

Table 5

MEAN RATINGS OF HELPER'S DESIRABILITY BY HELP-SEEKER'S SEX, HELPER COMPETENCE AND FRIENDSHIP STATUS FOR MATH

Sex of Help Seeker	Friend		Non-friend	
	high competent	low competent	high competent	low competent
Boys	5.69	4.07	3.00	3.60
Girls	5.42	5.33	3.33	3.00